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HUMAN NATURE, THE QUARTERLY, AND SOME OTHER THINGS

EDWARD ELLERY

What is it in our human nature that prompts us to oppose, to object, and to criticize unfavorably, the moment any one of us proposes something new or different? It cannot be a voluntary and conscious act, inspired by a desire to accomplish some good for humanity, for the opposition arises spontaneously and with equal vehemence whether the thing started be good or evil. Can it be that we have in this phenomenon an exhibition of the same kind of "oppositeness" that is shown by a certain animal when you try to drive it through a gate? It makes no difference what the gate leads to—whether to a field filled with succulent roots or to a freight car billed to the packing house—you must expend a great deal of energy just to get the thing through. Let a man propose a new building, or a bridge, or a railroad, or a new kind of transportation, a new course of study, a new civil law, or even a new periodical—it does not make any difference what it is, if it is new or different, objectors arise in all quarters where before there were no objectors. With unanimous, although unpremeditated assent, they begin their "it can't be done" or "why try it" or "things are good enough as they are." If the proposer persists and accomplishes what he had in mind, the objectors are by no means silenced. They change their base. "Why did you not do it this way—any way but the way you did accomplish it." Our life is full of instances of this sort of phenomenon. It is said the Great Eastern carried in its cabin on its first voyage a pamphlet which proved conclusively that a vessel of its size could never cross the ocean propelled by steam. There are engineers in New Orleans today who were satisfied a few years ago that tall buildings in that city were impossible on account of the marshy nature of the soil. I wonder what they think now when eating a tasty creole dinner in the New Grunewald Hotel, or when making purchases in the Maison Blanche. We seldom hear any objector acknowledging that he was mistaken; at least if he does, his acknowledgment is not so loud as his previous opposition. It is a cause for congratulation that men have gone ahead with their purposes and have accomplished great good for the human kind in the

face of opposition, sometimes because they are like that brickmaker who was the first to wet his straw before mixing it with clay and of whom it was afterward said, "the blame fool didn't know it couldn't be done, so he went ahead and done it"; or sometimes because their convictions were based on a superior intelligent grasp of nature's law.

All this is apropos of suggestions that were made about the *QUARTERLY* at the New York convention. The New York Central Railroad deprived me of the advantages of the afternoon session by running one of its trains considerably behind time. But enough was said at the dinner to indicate that somebody thinks the *QUARTERLY* ought to suspend publication. Doubtless somebody has what appear to him to be good reasons for his conclusion, but I have been asking "Why?" ever since the convention. What has the *QUARTERLY* done that warrants the suggestion? What has it left undone? There are so many reasons why it should be continued, why we should all congratulate those who began it and are conducting it, and why we should help its editors, that I am constrained to make this appeal to the Society at large "to do its bit," not only in supporting the *QUARTERLY* but in expanding its usefulness.

Sigma Xi is an unusual society in membership and purposes. It welds together men of widely varying interests, men whose fields of work apparently lie far apart. Every one of us is doubtless deluged with the literature of his special line, devotes all his energy to his own limited realm, and attends conventions of men who have like interests. That is all very valuable, but it deepens rather than broadens one's knowledge. We all know there are other fields and other workers, but it is a kind of subconscious knowledge. It is a fine thing to have that knowledge brought to the surface occasionally—say five times a year—four times by the *QUARTERLY* and once by the convention. The more frequently we think of workers with other interests than our own, and the more intimate glimpse we can get of the results of their work, the more convinced we become that we are all approaching the same goal, albeit by different paths. We all have two things in common, namely, we recognize the tremendous value of a fact, and we know that the quality of mind and of energy expended in uncovering a fact is the same whatever the field of work. This is our bond of brotherhood—we are "brothers in zealous research" in all realms. The *QUARTERLY* is a periodical reminder of brotherliness.

Not only have we a common interest, but we never can tell where two fields of work may touch, or where paths of research may cross. At first thought not much connection appears between the chemical researches of Dr. W. R. Whitney and the biological investigations of Dr. Jacques Loeb. The application of X-rays to medical diagnosis and treatment, and the possible future application to sterilizing and preserving food stuffs, are some of the places where the fields of work of these two great men touch. The problem of deciding the origin of the worlds is not the exclusive task of the astronomer, nor that of fixing the age of our old earth a question for geologists alone. The chemist will assist both by finding a few more answers to questions about radium and its disintegration products.

Any means of banding together all the great workers in science is well worth fostering. It is not enough to honor such by election to Sigma Xi. It is good to remind such of their connection with the Society. The *QUARTERLY* is a periodical reminder of the real existence of the Society and of the close proximity of all fields of work represented in its membership.

All of us have a lively interest in the activities of the various circles of scientific workers who constitute the chapters of Sigma Xi, now scattered over the entire country. The *QUARTERLY* feeds that interest. It is not fed at the convention. There are too many other things going on at the time of our convention to make possible more than merely hasty greetings among the delegates. We squeeze the Sigma Xi convention into a program already full to suffocation. In some respects it would be better if we had an independent convention, where attention and energy could be concentrated on Sigma Xi matters. But failing that, and even if we had such, the *QUARTERLY* brings us most interesting news from our thirty chapters. Such news is worth having. Here are many circles of enthusiastic men stimulating and inspiring young workers all over the country. They together constitute a splendid influence and promise much for the future of scientific research in the United States. Why should not each circle have the benefit of the experience and the success of every other circle? The *QUARTERLY* is a periodic news letter from our widely scattered chapters.

The *QUARTERLY* is not a perfect magazine. Neither our able editorial committee nor our secretary claims that it is. No piece of

work that anybody does is perfect; if it were the efforts of our scientific forbears would have left nothing for us to do. The QUARTERLY is not the *editor's* magazine. It is *our* magazine. We are responsible for it. Our help to make it better is eagerly sought and desired. If we object to the quality of the chapter reports, let each chapter improve its own reports. If we object to the kind of articles which appear in the QUARTERLY, let us submit better ones. There are enough of us to give snap and interest and helpfulness to the pages of the QUARTERLY. Why not do our bit? Far from objecting and criticizing and opposing, or from suggesting suspension of publication, we might all contribute a little effort to help our editorial committee. That sort of attitude would be of extreme scientific interest, because it would be a new phenomenon in the realm of human nature.

The University of Pennsylvania Chapter issues a card with the emblem of the Society engraved upon it giving the general program for the year's session, and sends a similar card with a special program for each meeting.

These announcements emphasize in dignified fashion the standing of the organization, and are worthy of imitation.